

Chapter 63: How to Cage an All-Powerful Mage

From an initial scan of the hangar, I'd say the Chosen kept a neat base of operations. Everything here was in its proper place with each surface scrubbed clean, which was unusual for a place like that. Typically, shuttles and strike ships came through a hangar far too quickly for it to be this spotless, but from what I understood, the Chosen didn't get many visitors.

Stopping beside me, Feena hugged herself, biting a lip as she ran her eyes over the hangar, and I raised an eyebrow at her, intent on keeping my mouth shut as much as possible while in this place. My sister could speak for me.

Still, with no one here to greet us, should we wait, or could we make ourselves at home? Before I could voice this question, a door on the other side of the hangar slid open, and a harried-looking woman, a- a *child of Ibis* flew through it.

The Chosen didn't discriminate between children of Ibis and Lutovish? If this was true, I couldn't help but smile about it. I didn't care what other people said about the Chosen or how much fear was shown to them. Already, I liked these people.

When she reached us, the woman bent to clutch her knees, taking gulps of air, and while she recovered, Feena and I watched her with amusement. After a moment, she straightened.

"Apologies for the wait," she gasped, "but you—"

She shoved a finger at me.

"—are early."

Odd way to greet someone.

Brushing her hand out of my face, I said, "I didn't mean to cause you distress. Hopefully, you can forgive me for it."

Wrinkling her nose, the unknown woman glanced at Feena.

"Awfully polite, isn't he?" she said.

For her part, Feena relaxed her hold on her chest.

"Yes, Dee, he is," she said. "I'm guessing from our reception that our arrival was expected, then?"

“Mmhmm! For a long time now,” Dee said, eagerly nodding. “Didn’t you get the update?”

“I’ve been a bit busy,” Feena said.

“Oh, right! Prepping this one for a dark day,” Dee said. “How’d that go?”

Dark day? Before I could ask about that, both women turned toward me while the child of Ibis ran her eyes over my body.

“Not so well,” Feena said.

With a brittle smile, I said, “If you’re quite done talking about me like I’m not here, I’d like to discuss why I’ve come to this place.”

At that, Dee lit up like the sun.

“Of course! You need access to a body, yes? Specifically, one belonging to our recent alien invaders,” she said. “I’ll take you to our expert on them.”

Recent alien invaders? The war with those from beyond the stars had taken place over a millennia ago! Also, how had this woman known what I needed?

As she spun to lead the way, I caught Feena’s eye.

‘You told her?’ I mouthed.

With a worried pinch to her eyes, my sister shook her head.

‘Then, how...?’

Shrugging, Feena hurried to catch up, forcing me to do the same. As we trotted across the hangar, I reminded myself that I shouldn’t get irritated right now. Sure, Feena and Dee had been talking above my head, discussing things that I didn’t understand, but even still, I was here to ask a favor. Dee could act as strangely as she wanted.

Unfortunately, dismissing my annoyance was difficult today.

When we reached the hangar door, a man hustled through it, nearly bowling me over in his haste. Without acknowledging us, he made a beeline for the strike ship, and I’d taken a step to follow him when Dee grabbed my arm, hugging it to her.

“Oh, leave him be. He’s just doing his job,” she said. “Besides, your friend isn’t the one you’re meant to protect.”

She expectantly gazed at me, but whatever she wanted, I couldn’t provide. I couldn’t move, stuck in place. Fortunately, Feena recognized my problem, resting a hand on the other woman’s shoulder.

“Let him go, Dee,” she said. “Despite how relaxed he looks, he’s on edge, and you know what that means.”

Rapidly blinking, Dee said, “Oh.”

She dropped my arm, watching with fascination as I made the knife I’d been holding disappear. I didn’t like that a Chosen had boarded the strike ship behind me, presumably with the intent of speaking with Damari, but I couldn’t let that situation affect me. My friend could handle themselves, so once I’d collect myself, I waved toward the door.

“After you.”

The interior of the Chosen’s base was as immaculate as what we’d found in the hangar, but here, there was color, coming from plant life and artwork. Not many people were walking down the halls, but the few who did were from both sides of the water. Seeing Lutovish and children of ibis working together as equals, as we were always meant to be, gave me great pleasure, a glimpse of a lifelong goal made manifest.

This blissful sense of contentment lasted until we turned another corner and I saw a man made of only white striding toward us. In a blink, I was in front of Feena, pulling her to safety, with my requested rifle aimed at the mage’s face, and he stopped short, lifting his hands. After a beat of stunned silence, Dee clicked her tongue before pulling my arm down.

“Please. I know you’ve fought many *iisen* over your life, but surely you must recognize by now that we Chosen won’t hurt you, protector,” she said. “Now, come.”

She took off again, and hesitantly, I followed with Feena at my back, watching the mage the whole time. He maintained my stare until he’d fallen out of view.

Had that man been one of the *iisen* I’d handed off to Feena over the decades, there to be delivered to parts unknown, or someone else? I wished I could say that I remembered the faces of the people I’d brought in, but the sad truth was that after so many decades spent catching mages, they’d started blurring together.

I was still contemplating this when Dee stopped beside a door.

“Before we meet with Lan, I should warn you two about a few things, doubly so in your case,” she said with a bemused smile at me. “First of all, ze’s an *ii*. Get over it. Second! Ze is eccentric. So, you know... prepare yourself.”

Giving me no time to protest that spiel, she marched through the door, tugging me and Feena after her by proxy. The room beyond was dim, excessively so, and seeing that, I touched a glow ball in my pocket, activating it. A mage who enjoyed the dark? Usually, that indicated that they were a Shade, commanding one of the most powerful *liiaresim* in existence, and if this was so, my glow ball would give me some form of defense against this one.

In the low light, I spotted a blobby figure in a chair, hunched over a desk in the corner. I couldn't tell what ze was doing, but ze stiffened when we entered.

"Stay here for a moment," Dee said.

Before she could move, however, the figure spoke.

"No closer, please. You'll disturb my babies. What do you want, Dee?"

Completely unphased by the *ii's* brusque behavior, Dee said, "I've brought you the protector, Lan."

If there had been a trace of sarcasm in that last bit, Lan ignored it. Throwing zir head back, ze groaned.

"Eighteen minutes, forty-one seconds, and fifty-eight milliseconds early," ze said. "If you rushed while getting him here, I'll mess with your digestive system for a week, Dee."

So, ze was also a Somadept. Given zir probable Shade *liiaresim*, that was a scary combination of magics.

Even so, Dee didn't seem to care. With her eyes fixed on the ceiling, she shook her head.

"Yes, yes," she said. "Now, will you hear his request, or are you going to be-?"

"Fifty-eight degrees, fifty-one minutes, and fifty-four seconds north. One hundred and eight degrees, fifty-four minutes, and twenty-five seconds west. Your coordinates," Lan rattled off. "Now, get out of my hair."

Sighing, Dee rolled her head toward me, giving me a look.

"I told you ze was eccentric," she said.

I shrugged. If I'd gotten what I needed without a word spoken on my part, so much the better for me. Even still, I was curious how Lan had known the coordinates I'd need before I'd made my request. Also, ze's lack of research before giving me an answer was concerning, but at this point, I wouldn't question it. I was already working off of a series of long shots and shaky theories. What was one more?

"Hell, you're just as strange as zir," Dee said to herself. "Fine. Bye, Lan. See you never, hopefully."

Ze made a noncommittal noise, but Dee was already halfway out of the room, uninterested in hearing it. As we left, I nudged my sister, lifting both eyebrows. Were the Chosen always this strange?

She'd turned inward, however, only paying attention enough to chuckle at my implication. As we meandered back to the hangar, I kept an eye on her, noting how she hadn't once stopped chewing on her lip. What had her so concerned?

As if to throw me further off balance, Feena fully returned to the present when we reached the hangar, stopping short with blood draining from her face. Dee didn't look much better, leaving her mouth flapping while she stared ahead, and when I glanced toward what had captured their attention, I cocked my head. Why had a single mage elicited such an extreme reaction from them?

To be fair, this one looked different from every other *ii* I'd ever seen. They tended to wear all white, matching their clothing to their body's complexion, and it was usually cut into a flowing robe. This girl... teenager really, was wearing a pair of form-fitting pants and a loose sweater, and it was all black, my favorite color for clothing.

She was talking with the man who'd stormed past us earlier, seemingly oblivious to how much he was cringing away from her, and on top of that, he was wringing his hands, as if expecting her to destroy him at any minute. Considering how many mages I'd seen here, that reaction seemed out of proportion. Was this *ii* truly so dangerous?

"I have to go," Dee faintly said. "Will you...?"

Feena just nodded, letting our guide vanish in a flurry, and I turned toward my sister while watching the mage.

"Threat level?" I asked.

Jumping, Feena glanced over at me, landing her eyes on where I was touching a weapon.

Slapping my hand, she hissed, "You *cannot* attack her. Not even if she hurts me or you. The world needs her far more than it needs us. Promise me."

Ha! Like I'd ever let someone attack a loved one without killing them first. Still. If it would put Feena at ease...

"Ok," I said. "I think."

Snorting, Feena patted my arm.

"Don't worry," she said. "From what I understand, you're her favorite."

Wha-?

Feena pushed me forward, and scowling at her, I made my way toward the strike ship. When I was halfway there, the mage glanced up, and when she saw me, she broke into a beatific grin.

"Zae-zae!" she shouted.

She started running toward me while the man she'd been speaking with slunk away. I froze, strung between my promise to my sister and a need to defend myself. Normally, I could easily resolve an internal conflict like this, but this time, exhaustion made it last a tad too long, long enough for the mage to notice my hesitation. Slowing, she stopped several paces away with something sad

moving across her face.

“You don’t know me,” she said.

“Should I?” I asked.

Everything about this visit had made me uncomfortable—how the hell did they know so much about me and what I needed?—and given how strange it had been, I wasn’t sure how to steer myself into safe waters with this conversation. Slumping, the mage shook her head, but after a few heartbeats, she straightened, putting on a brave face.

“Why should you know me? We haven’t met yet,” she said. “Let’s change that, shall we?”

Stepping forward, she offered me a hand, and when I stared at it, unmoving, she chuckled.

“I’m not a Somadept, Zae-zae,” she said. “Shade, Vanisher, Vimian, and Earthshaker? Yes. Somadept? No.”

Which meant there was no harm in taking her hand. As I shook it, I frowned. *lisen* weren’t normally so free with sharing which magic types they controlled, so why had she told me hers?

“You are Zaeden. Protector of the *avaarien*, the progenitor’s partner, the most reluctant of *Lokke Vitras*, and the only Lutovish in a long while who claims no House,” the mage said, “and I am Sol.”

With a slow blink, I fought the need to shake my head, hoping to clear it. If I did that, it would reveal how badly she’d shaken me. Having a complete stranger speak one of my deepest secrets aloud felt... strange, but her name pulled me free of shock. I latched onto it, unwilling to contemplate how this mage knew so much about me. Not now.

Sol. Where had I heard that name? After a moment’s thought, I clicked my tongue. Kalaski. Right. The other *fucking strange* thing that had happened recently.

“I have a message for you,” I said, barely noticing how empty I sounded. “The mages of Kalaski wanted you to know that ‘they, the faithful, have accomplished their part of your vision’.”

Releasing me, Sol flung a hand over her mouth while tears filled her eyes.

“Then... they are...”

Swallowing hard, she forced a smile.

“Thank you for conveying the message, Zae-zae,” she said. “It means a lot.”

Why did she keep using my grandmother’s nickname for me? How did she know it?

Before I could think too hard about that, Sol forged onward.

“In any case, you have much to do, from what I understand, and I won’t keep you from it. I’d leave you with a piece of advice before I go, though,” she said. “Concerning my fellow *iisen*, you should know that as with every other human, we were all once frightened children, shivering in the dark. Like you, we’ve all once hidden from the monster that’s come to kill us. Please, remember that when hunting us seems like the only light in your world.”

Those words were like barbs, digging into the heart of me, and I barely contained my wince. Did she think that I enjoyed hunting her people down?

With a bow, Sol said, “Well met, protector of my *avaarien*. Until we meet again.”

Numbly, I watched her trade places with Feena. My sister ignored the other woman, although she relaxed once they’d passed one another.

“Quite a piece of work, isn’t she?” she said with a nervous chuckle. “Shake it off, Zae. She unsettles everyone. Part of her charm. Besides, you need to get going, right?”

That was right. My mission. Saving Lutov. Why was I finding it so difficult to focus on that?

“Feena, all of these people are strange, not just her,” I said, “and what do you mean, *I* need to go?”

I had to act as if nothing had affected me. Maybe then, I could return to my typical, cocky self. Maybe I could shake off this increasingly common sense of unease. Like something, both inside and out, was utterly wrong.

“For now, I’m staying here. I have some unfinished business to take care of,” Feena said, “but please, don’t worry about me. I’ll be back in Xygek before you, probably. Unless you plan on retrieving your family from the city before heading into the unknown?”

Why would she think that I’d take my loved ones to the place my new coordinate pinpointed? It was somewhere deep within the Tainted Lands! I wouldn’t let them go anywhere near it.

“They’ll be fine in Xygek for a little while longer,” I said. “As for you... if you’re sure about staying, then I wish you luck.”

Shoving me, Feena laughed.

“I think you’ll need luck more than me,” she said. “Be safe.”

“I will.”

After a hug, we separated, and I boarded the strike ship.

When I entered the front of it, Damari was curled up in their seat with their arms around their legs and their face buried in their knees. They were breathing hard, and I cleared my throat, hoping I wasn’t interrupting something. As expected, when their head shot up, their face was a mess of tears, and they hastily swiped at their eyes. I- I’d never seen them cry before.

“Sorry. Sorry!” they said. “Give me a second, and I’ll get us in the air-”

Striding to their side, I crouched beside them.

“Damari, stop,” I said. ‘Look at me.”

Reluctantly, they did as I’d asked.

“Are you ok?”

Hiccupping on a laugh, Damari grimaced before nodding.

“Everything’s fine,” they said. “Just had a visitor. He told me something I didn’t want to hear, but... it needed to be said. Sit down.”

When I didn’t move, they rolled their eyes.

“For fuck’s sake, LV. I’ll be fine. Don’t get all dramatic on me, although...”

They looked away.

“I’d like it if you sat in the back for this flight. I could use some time alone.”

Rising, I said, “Of course. Here are our coordinates as well as an authorization code to lower the Tainted Land’s *galnuka*.”

When I waved toward Damari, they resolutely faced forward, and I winced. Much as I might do it to myself, I hated watching other people ignore whatever issue was bothering them.

“Please, let me know if I can help,” I said. “I’d hate to learn that you were suffering when I could have done something for you.”

A smile twitched onto Damari’s face.

“Will do,” they said. “Now, get the fuck out.”

Chuckling, I followed my instructions. Before I’d found a place to collapse, Damari had us airborne, and we left the Chosen’s base of operations behind.

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